


NOEL-LEVITZ EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

Six Essentials—and Six Common Mistakes—in Cabinet-Level Strategic Enrollment Planning

Higher education is going through a period of unprecedented pressures for efficiency and effectiveness, including demands for tuition control, greater student success, increased accountability, and in many states, rapidly changing demographics and increased competition.

In response to these current pressures, relatively few campuses appear to be devoting time to updating or creating a multi-year, strategic enrollment plan—a cabinet-level activity that, ironically, may be the most effective of all in combating these pressures and in ensuring long-term enrollment and fiscal health. Perhaps this is because strategic planning in general is widely viewed as a periodic, once-every-five-years-or-so planning “event.” In truth, however, effective multi-year, strategic enrollment planning continuously re-aligns the institution with its current and future environment and provides ongoing, essential guidance for an institution’s fiscal health, enrollment, academic programs, and more.

In today’s higher education scene, the absence of an up-to-date, multi-year strategic enrollment plan—and the widespread dependence on annual recruitment and retention plans that are developed almost exclusively by an institution’s enrollment division—is akin to swimming amid sharks. External forces may emerge to unexpectedly “bite” an institution. Just as important, entire divisions of an institution may be chasing goals that are unrealistic and in conflict with those of other divisions. In addition, the lack of strategic planning virtually guarantees that the institution will miss some significant opportunities for strengthening enrollment and revenue.



Find out how to optimize campus revenues and enrollment with better planning at the cabinet level. The following six points define essential elements of cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning, along with six mistaken applications of it, based on Noel-Levitz consultations with campuses.

1) Plan strategically with everyone on the cabinet

Do you believe you are already doing cabinet-level, strategic enrollment planning? Such planning is widely under-utilized and often misunderstood. How is a strategic enrollment plan initiated at the cabinet level?

When it is done effectively, cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning is an ongoing, data-driven planning process that engages all institutional divisions and departments in strategic thinking and coordinated planning to achieve measurable enrollment outcomes, including student success and retention. The aim of this planning process is to continuously align an institution's mission with its changing external and internal environments for the long-term fiscal and enrollment health of the institution. The planning process is initiated by members of the president's cabinet as described on page 8 of this paper.

A recent Noel-Levitz study found that fewer than one-third of institutions¹ report that they have a written long-range (at least three-year) strategic enrollment plan that they consider to be of good or excellent quality. Our experience at Noel-Levitz lines up with the results of this survey. We find that most institutions either don't have multi-year, strategic enrollment plans or have plans that really are not very strategic. Many times the plan is an excellent statement of vision and/or goals, but it is not grounded on a good understanding of the projected environment, the competition, the institution's strengths and limitations, the projected costs and outcomes for each strategy, and other critical factors. In addition, we frequently see institutions mistakenly assigning responsibility for this planning process only to their enrollment teams, rather than to a broad-based, cabinet-level planning group.

The upshot of these deficiencies is that many institutions are under-prepared for a challenging future. They are putting themselves at risk but may not even know it because they aren't conducting cabinet-level, strategic enrollment planning.

Mistake 1—are you making this error?

On many campuses, enrollment goals are primarily derived from the annual budget calculation as in “we need \$1M more to fund what we need so we'd better add 50 students more to the expected entering freshman class.”

In contrast, cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning compels institutions to gather and carefully assess an array of internal and external data *before* setting multi-year goals. (See page 6 for examples of these data.)

¹ Noel-Levitz, Inc., *Student Recruitment Practices at Four-Year and Two-Year Institutions* (Iowa City: Noel-Levitz, 2007), p. 3.

Why is strategic enrollment planning a cabinet-level activity?

The president and the cabinet have the responsibility to strategically plan for the institution's future enrollment in order to optimize educational resources and contain costs. Among many reasons why strategic enrollment planning should be an ongoing priority of an institution's cabinet are the following:

- *For chief academic officers*, projected enrollment headcounts influence academic program planning and staffing. In addition, the talents, ability levels, diversity, and backgrounds within these projected student bodies influence: the stature and appeal of academic programs; faculty morale and retention; the need for support programs; and student retention.
- *For chief fiscal officers*, projected new student enrollments and continuing student return rates influence the financial bottom line. In addition, the future profiles and sizes of the student body can be altered to control costs, support facility planning, maximize current facility usage, and produce new revenue streams.
- *For the chief student affairs officer*, the projected types and sizes of enrollments influence the student experience, student affairs programming, and the range of student needs and interests addressed by student affairs programs.

Ultimately, for every member of the cabinet, student enrollment—including graduation rates—is a measure of how well an institution is fulfilling its mission. Indeed, how can any institution's educational mission be optimized without the best, most precise enrollment planning possible?

As the changing environment becomes all-the-more complex, cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning provides colleges and universities the ability to connect academic planning, institutional budgeting, student affairs programming, and other areas of strategic importance to an institution with the long-term goal of enrollment and fiscal stability.

Because of its enormous impact, multi-year strategic enrollment planning should remain one of your top priorities at all times.

Are you prepared for changing student demographics?

In the next 5-10 years, many states will see significant declines in the number of high school graduates.² If your institution depends on high school graduates from these states, you may have to significantly increase your market share of these graduates just to maintain the sizes of your incoming classes. Do you have a strategic enrollment plan that is addressing the projected changes in your marketplace?



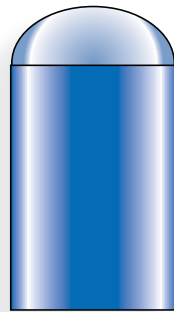
² Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State and Race/Ethnicity, 1992 to 2022* (Boulder, CO: WICHE, 2008).

2) Stop working in silos

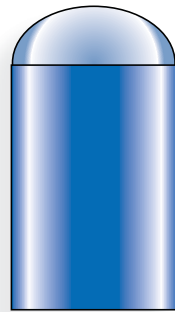
While many institutions have become increasingly sophisticated and proactive in managing their enrollment outcomes, different divisions and departments within these institutions often continue to set goals and pursue objectives without reference to a broader strategy that acknowledges their underlying interconnectedness. In addition, many institutions are mistakenly assuming that their enrollment teams can develop an effective enrollment plan without the substantial input and involvement of other divisions, as previously mentioned. The result is a disconnected set of plans that may look like this:

A disconnected set of plans

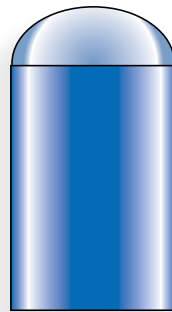
On many campuses, planning occurs in divisional silos, resulting in a disconnected set of plans that limits enrollment and revenue.



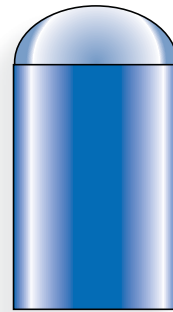
Fundraising Plan



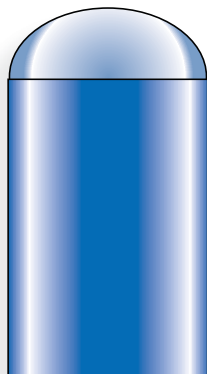
Technology Plan



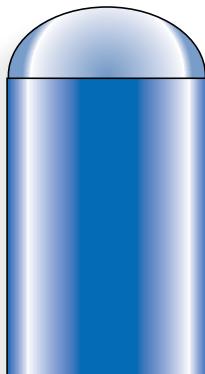
Research Plan



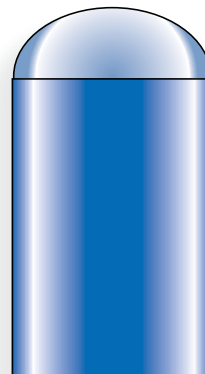
Student Affairs
Co-Curricular Plan



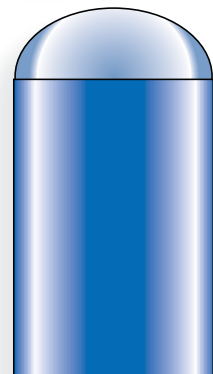
Academic Plan



Fiscal Plan



Enrollment Plan



Facilities Plan

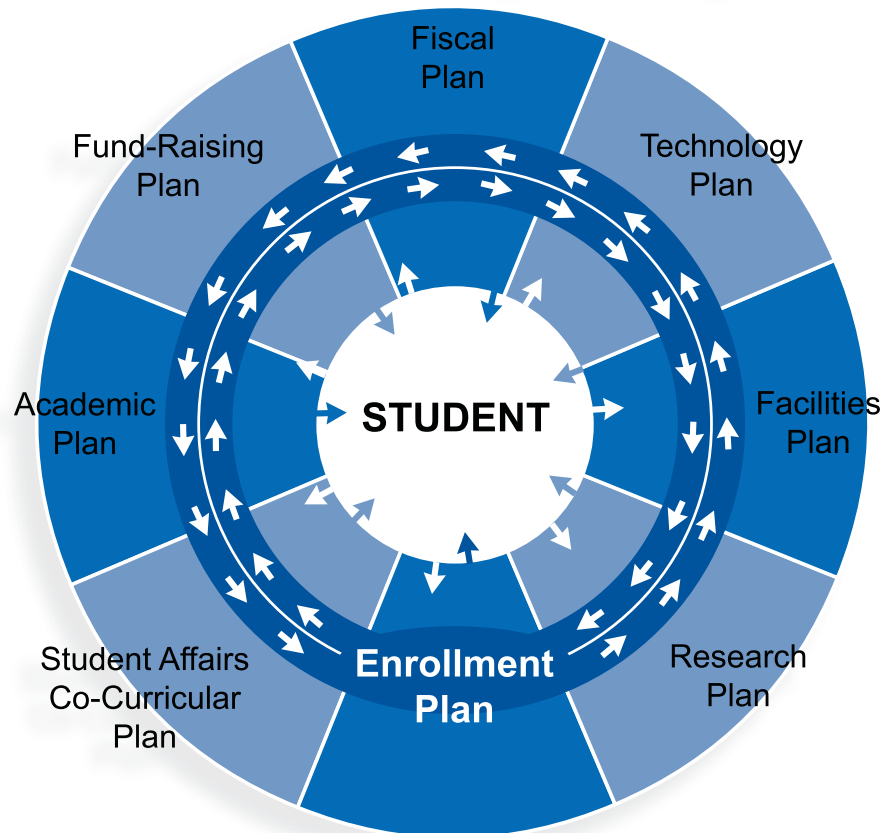
Truly strategic enrollment planning cannot solely be the responsibility of an institution's enrollment division, nor can it only happen just once every five years, or annually, at a planning retreat.

In reality, issues of enrollment and student success reach across institutional divisions and require the collaboration of virtually everyone on the cabinet. For example, how can one do academic planning without enrollment planning? Or, how can fiscal planning be accomplished without enrollment planning? Still, in our visits to campuses nationwide, we continue to see examples of institutional strategic plans and strategic enrollment plans that are disconnected and at times contradictory. In the worst case, an entire division may be following one plan without realizing that other divisions of the campus are following a plan that includes opposing courses of action and is based on opposing assumptions about enrollment.

To address these and other challenges, and to ensure success in today's changing environment, proactive leaders must propose new planning models that emphasize cooperation and

collaboration rather than isolation and opposition. Instead of operating in separate silos, an ongoing, measured process of integrated planning across divisions might look like this:

Institutional Strategic Planning



An integrated planning model

Integrated planning processes often compel institutions to make difficult decisions that have been avoided in the past. For many institutions, these decisions are integral to their long-term fiscal and enrollment health. Just one example: Enrollment strategies and goals without a strong fiscal plan to support them is a formula that usually leads to failure.

With students at the center, the model above depicts the organic interdependency of all of the components of higher education. It shows that enrollment planning must be integrated with all the components of planning. For example, institutions cannot do effective facilities and student affairs planning without strongly coordinating those efforts with effective enrollment planning, and vice-versa. Of course, all institutional planning functions best with an accompanying well-understood mission, vision, and strategic direction, and when plans are made operational with specific measurements, timelines, staffing, and budgets.

Importantly, for any cabinet-level planning process to work, it is critical to build ownership among the members of the cabinet and among their constituents campuswide—so that as many people as possible have input and influence into the resulting plan and confidence in the plan's direction. (For more guidance on building ownership in a planning process, see the section on listening at the top of page 8.)

Mistake 2—could this happen on your campus?

A university makes a major investment in new buildings to help bring its campus up to date. The plans are drawn, funding is found, and the buildings are built on schedule. Only afterward does anyone realize that a number of classrooms

in the building are often sitting empty during peak times of the day. The cause? A demographic downturn, a factor that could have been anticipated and addressed through an integrated academic/enrollment/facilities plan.

3) Focus on data from the internal and external environment

To navigate the current and coming changes in higher education, the cornerstone of effective strategic enrollment planning is good, accurate, and rich data that enable campus leaders to understand their institution's internal and external environment. Planning that fails to consider environmental data—and the means to extract it, understand it, and analyze it—is a formula for disaster that renders the planning process impotent.

Examples of helpful data in cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning include:

Examples—external data for strategic enrollment planning

- Brand/image studies to understand the perceptions of the institution among prospective students, parents, counselors, and employers
- Price sensitivity studies
- Market share and trend analyses
- Projected demographics of target populations
- Workforce demand projections
- Analyses of prospective student/parent/counselor/employer wants and needs, including academic programs
- Employer satisfaction studies

Examples—internal data for strategic enrollment planning

- Assessments of the relationship between enrollment and fiscal health
- Enrollment and fiscal projection scenarios
- Analyses of student flows into academic majors and courses and course capacity/demand analyses
- Assessments of students' satisfaction, engagement, and what is important to them
- Student attrition research, including the profile of incoming students who succeed and those who don't succeed
- Graduating student outcome analyses
- Cost of serving different student populations

After gathering data such as the above, campus leaders have the means to pursue truly strategic enrollment planning and goal-setting. They are able to align the institution with the realities of its environment and, therefore, enable the institution to sustain long-term enrollment and fiscal health, rather than chase goals that may be unrealistically high or that lead the institution in a wrong direction.

Mistake 3—could this happen on your campus?

Unaware of the assumptions he is making, a president decides to set an overall undergraduate student enrollment “stretch goal” for his institution that represents a five-percent increase each year for the next five years through a combined recruitment

and retention initiative. However, the approach is not data-driven. Had he looked closer, he would have realized that five percent was unattainable due to shifting demographics in the institution's primary market.

Planning that fails to consider environmental data—and the means to extract it, understand it, and analyze it—is a formula for disaster.

How does this planning model compare to your planning model?



Ideally, cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning is conducted in concert with institutional strategic planning, or it is done separately at the same time as a parallel planning process.

Why does it matter?

An effective approach to cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning is essential to:

1. Controlling your institution's future fiscal health,
2. Carrying out your mission, and
3. Understanding and working with external and internal factors that could impact both.

Ultimately at stake is the quality of the educational experience that you can provide to your students and, in turn, the level of attractiveness of your institution to prospective students, faculty, and staff.

Listening makes a difference

Remember that giving people a voice in the planning process, regardless of their position at the institution, is a smart move. Listening sessions help larger groups to contribute to a project. Ideally, every member of a campus should have a role in the planning process so that each person has a stake in its outcomes.

Remember, too, that building ownership is a process—not a one-time event. While easily accomplished (it costs nothing!), effective communication is an often-overlooked element of change management. The absence of proactive communication from a planning group leaves a vacuum which will be filled by the rumor mill, speculation, or those in opposition.

4) Assign an action team—not just a Strategic Planning Council

An important initial step in getting a cabinet-level strategic enrollment planning process up and running is for the cabinet to identify a cross-section of innovative and information-driven strategic planners and leaders who can affect institutional direction and allocation of resources in all eight of the areas that were shown on page 5. This “Strategic Planning Council” should include members of the cabinet as well as other leaders from the faculty and administration.

While the council will provide institution-wide participation and buy-in, there must also be a smaller action subcommittee that ensures that the process is moving at an appropriate pace. This action group also ensures that the appropriate external and internal environmental research (as shown on page 6) is occurring at a high quality level.

The support of the president in establishing these leadership groups is imperative. As success of the planning is critical, the president should marshal and secure the support of leaders in advance of their participation. A non-involved president will render the best laid plans impossible to achieve.

Special care should be taken in securing leadership for the council. Given the challenges of embedded institutional cultures, an enthusiastic, respected faculty member might be best positioned to advance the work of the group.

Importantly, each member of the council has two roles:

1. Provides particular expertise to the process
2. Communicates with constituents and brings feedback

Last, but not least, for the planning process to be successful, we have found at least one member of the action team must be an experienced strategic planner/facilitator. Hopefully there is one on your campus. If not, consider bringing an experienced facilitator to campus to facilitate your work and decision-making.

Mistake 4—are you making this error?

At a mid-sized university, a vice president is charged with implementing an institution-wide planning process. The vice president proceeds to assemble a large, broad-based task force representing many divisions of the campus. But the work of the task force is slow and gets derailed by the sheer size of the group, the

challenge of coordinating the work of multiple divisions, by the lack of buy-in from important campus constituents, and by a lack of support from the president. To overcome these challenges, a small, president-appointed subcommittee can be invaluable, as described above.

To avoid getting mired down, we have found that large-group planning councils require the support of a smaller “action” subcommittee.

Is your institution prepared for today's increasing diversity?

Students of color are changing the face of college campuses, with Hispanic students leading the way. By 2015, fully one-third of college-aged students nationwide (37.2%) will be from minority background, with Hispanic students accounting for 15 percent of all undergraduates.³ To what extent will the additional diversity in your future enrollments require different approaches to student success, retention, and recruitment?

5) Avoid setting goals too early in the process

Because it is important that institutions collect and use data to inform their decision-making, Noel-Levitz suggests that institutions use a planning approach in which quantifiable goals are not set until well into the planning process. For example, to develop a cabinet-level strategic enrollment plan, the initial strategic planning process may take six to twelve months in order to collect, analyze, and utilize the relevant environmental and internal information and data that are required to inform your strategies and your future directions (i.e., the niches to develop, maintain, and avoid). It is only during the latter half of this work that we suggest setting goals based on the confidence you have in your identified strategies and your informed assessment of your environment.

In the early stages of the planning process, rather than set quantifiable goals, we suggest that institutions identify the key performance indicators (KPIs) that define enrollment and fiscal health for the institution, and that the institution collect the necessary data to understand how these indicators may be influenced as described earlier on page 6. KPIs are acknowledged measurements on a campus that are critical to the mission and fiscal health of the institution. Examples include:

- Full-time undergraduate/graduate headcount/credits
- Diversity indicators
- Graduation rates
- Financial results such as:
 - Annual net revenue
 - Average net revenue per student
 - Composite financial index

A careful examination of these indicators and the factors that influence them will reveal more and more about the state of the institution's environment. Based on these data and analyses, campus leaders then develop strategies to optimize the KPIs. Only then, based on the level of confidence in these strategies, do we believe that the leadership team can set reasonable enrollment goals for the future.

Mistake 5

After confirming the coming year's goals for new student enrollment with its campus leadership, an enrollment team at a major university proceeds to enact strategies that lead to success—or so the team thought. As the team is celebrating, it learns that many people on

campus are critical of the newly enrolled class's profile, including the faculty, the deans, and the chief fiscal officer. What was painfully obvious was that the institution lacked a clear set of agreed-upon goals.

Many references in strategic planning literature point to a process where goals are not set until late in the process. Here is one example:⁴

1. Select the initial planning committee
2. Introduce the process
3. Establish appropriate KPIs and organize key performance areas
4. Survey the environment
5. Share results with larger audience
6. Develop definition and measurement criteria
7. Measure current performance
8. Establish five- and ten-year goals
9. Determine strategies (using SWOT) in each KPI area
10. Establish broad-based support

3 Anthony P. Carnevale and Richard A. Fry, *Crossing the Great Divide: Can We Achieve Equity When Generation Y Goes to College?* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2000).

4 Daniel J. Rowley, Herman D. Lujan, and Michael G. Dolence, *Strategic Change in Colleges and Universities: Planning to Survive and Prosper*, Jossey Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

What metrics can you use to connect the work of the fiscal, academic, and enrollment divisions?

For perspective on metrics related to connecting enrollment and fiscal management, please see our white paper, *Connecting Enrollment and Fiscal Management*, available at www.noellevitz.com/fiscalindicators. In addition, for examples and a discussion on integrating the measurement of academic standards with measurements of student success and retention, please see our paper, *A New Way to Measure Student Success*, available at www.noellevitz.com/studentsuccess.

6) Regularly update the strategic plan

Because a multi-year strategic enrollment plan is always measurable and empirically based, the ability to monitor and evaluate results is always possible. The leaders of the planning process should champion and celebrate demonstrable results. In addition, there must be a routine process in place to routinely modify the plan based on continuous evaluations and environmental changes. Otherwise, the plan becomes dated and less useful to the institution. Specifically, it is critical to monitor, evaluate, and probably modify the identified strategies and tactics that form the core of the plan using new information on the institution's internal and external environment.

Brevity is the friend of an effective monitoring approach. Summaries that are readily understood by all and relatable to all (the board, the cabinet, deans, directors, faculty and staff) are critical. There will be some who want or need more details than is stated in the plan. For these individuals, provide electronic links from the summary plans to the details.

Because of its enormous impact, multi-year strategic enrollment planning should remain one of your top priorities at all times. Without an up-to-date plan—and without a process for keeping the plan up to date—you are taking significant risks that your future enrollments will not meet your institution's mission and vision. Future variations in the environment, including increased competition, may pose major threats to your institution's prosperity.

Mistake 6

The cabinet at a mid-size institution “completes” a strategic enrollment planning process after

gathering data, conducting listening sessions, and holding a three-day planning retreat.

Continue the discussion

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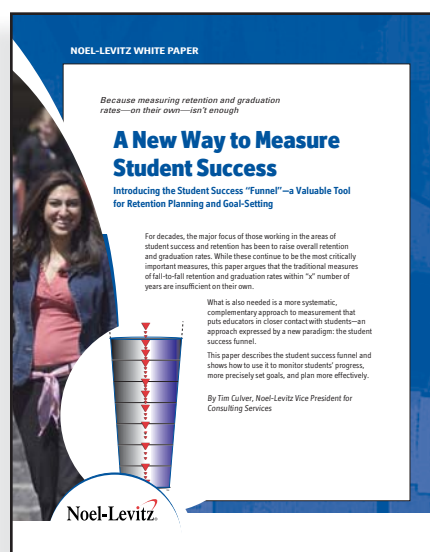
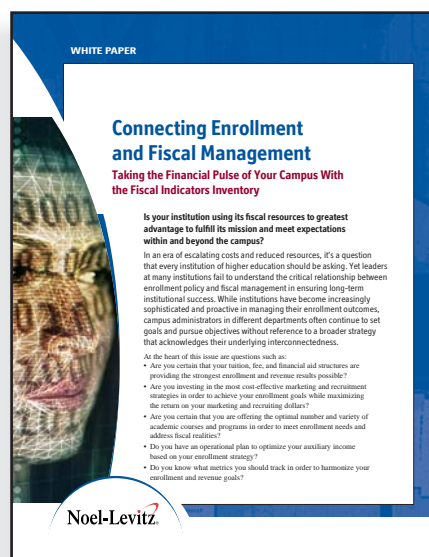
For further reading...

Connecting Enrollment and Fiscal Management

Is your institution using its fiscal resources to the greatest advantage? This paper introduces the Fiscal Indicators Inventory, a system of metrics and questions your campus should be tracking to optimize its fiscal health.

Download this paper at

www.noellevitz.com/fiscalindicators



A New Way to Measure Student Success

For decades, student success and enrollment management professionals have focused on the traditional measures of fall-to-fall retention and graduation rates. Find out why these measures are insufficient on their own and how you can more precisely measure student success outcomes.

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Watch for a series of forthcoming briefings from Noel-Levitz on the role of each member of the cabinet in strategic enrollment planning.





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About Noel-Levitz and this Executive Briefing

Noel-Levitz is a nationally recognized higher education consulting firm that specializes in strategic planning for enrollment and student success. We are committed to advancing higher education, student access, and student success. Our white papers are intended to stimulate dialogue and discussion among campus leaders on emerging practices.

This executive briefing is the first in a series of forthcoming briefings from Noel-Levitz. Please watch for additional briefings on the role of each member of the cabinet in strategic enrollment planning.

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